2:Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1951
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

I will not discuss here the use of obscene language in general among the Nuer but only the custom called *leng*, conventionalized exchange of obscenities, which is regarded as being pre-eminently a form of behaviour between paternal cousins of the same sex and generation, generally between males, whether they be first cousins or farther removed. It would be most improper for a man to exchange obscenities in this way with other kinsmen. A man says to a paternal cousin '*ban leng*', 'let us have a slanging-game'. Then they abuse each other in turn, prefacing each epithet with the exclamation *awai yah!* The exchange often develops into a contest to see which of the two can continue the longest without repeating himself. As Nuer are practised and have a fertile imagination in such matters, the duel may be kept up for several minutes before one of the men cannot think of an obscenity he has not already used and thus loses the duel, which is closed by shouts of laughter on both sides. The obscenities, which are the most extravagant I have ever heard, cover, with many elaborations, every possible kind of sexual act, the sodomy motif being the most prominent, and refer to the partners to the duel themselves and their fathers, mothers, sisters, paternal and maternal aunts and uncles, grandparents, and sweethearts, though only terms of relationship and not proper names are used. The partners also call one another Dinka, witches, spongers, bastards, gluttons, and so forth. No offence is taken at the foulest sexual references to relatives, though I was told that paternal first cousins ought to avoid mentioning the father and the paternal aunt—'you do not do this because of your father'—and to restrict their observations to the mother and persons on her side of the family. Paternal cousins farther removed appear to feel no embarrassment in mentioning the father and his sister. However, paternal cousins avoid such exchanges in the presence of unrelated persons of the opposite sex.

The *wac*, father's sister, is not so prominent in the picture of family portraits as the father's brother because she is generally a member of a different local community, but Nuer say that she is like the father's brother: 'Your *wac* is your *gwanlen* also.' She may treat you badly when you are little, and even if she is kind she does not love you: 'The ones she loves are her grandchildren and the children of her sisters.' A Nuer told me that 'she thinks of you merely as "*gatdemar*" ("son of my brother")', by which he meant that she does not think of you as '*gatda*' ('my son'). She may talk

They may also be uttered GOD if he says anything
at all, in the petition a man on a journey makes to God as he knots 782
grasses together at the side of a path, a practice Nuer call *tuc*. A 777
man may do this because he has knocked his 'bad foot' against a stump in the path, for this presages misfortune, which can be avoided by asking God to let the badness remain in the grass so that the traveller may continue his journey with fortune. Each man has a 'good (auspicious) foot' and a 'bad (inauspicious) foot' and he learns which is which by experience. Nuer tie grass in the same manner to ensure success in any enterprise for which a journey is undertaken, often at the present day when they go to buy or beg something from an Arab merchant. They ask God to let them make a good bargain or that the merchant may make them a gift.[1] Nuer may also utter these phrases of prayer at any time as devout ejaculations, and not only when they are in trouble or desire a boon, for they have told me that they like to speak to God when they are happy (*loc tedh*) and because they are happy, and that they often say a few words to him as they go about their daily affairs.

I have already discussed the significance of some of these 782
prayerful words and expressions: 'our father', 'it is thy universe', 'it is thy will', and others. I will now consider the meaning of yet a few others, choosing for the purpose the commonest petitionary phrases. Before doing this I would draw attention to the fact that the petitioner generally uses the first person plural. In private ejaculations a Nuer may use such expressions as 'ah, my God', 'ah, God, what is this?', and 'let me journey well', but he will also use the plural pronoun, and in prayers and invocations uttered in public the plural is invariably used: 'let us be at peace', or whatever the expression may be.[2] I draw attention to this because it is not, I believe, just an indication that there are other people on whose behalf the speaker is asking God's favours. It is rather that the occasions on which prayers are publicly offered are generally

[1] Some Nuer have told me that this custom of knotting grasses originated among the Dinka. It is found among some, if not all, the Dinka tribes (R. T. Johnston, 'The Religious and Spiritual Beliefs of the Bor Dinka', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1934, p. 126).

[2] There are two pronominal suffixes for the first person plural, *ko* and *ne*, which are respectively exclusive and inclusive. For example, '*bako wa*', 'we shall go', includes the speaker and others but not the person or persons spoken to, whereas '*bane wa*', 'we shall go', includes also the person or persons spoken to. In speaking to God Nuer have, of course, to use the exclusive form. [193] [195]

16: Evans-Pritchard E-5 (1931, 1936) 1956
FJ22 Nuer FJ22

is a person of the above (*ran nhial*)' and that man, or ghost, 'is a person of the below (*ran piny*)'. The difference, and the contrast, is clearly seen in the Nuer belief that the soul of a person struck by lightning is changed into Spirit. It is evident also in the way they speak about their prophets and about sick persons. They say that Spirit comes from above and enters into them or takes hold of them. Since, therefore, Spirit and soul are conceived of as of different natures, the conception of Spirit cannot be derived from a development of the conception of soul. On the contrary, it is precisely because God and man are thought of as quite different sorts of being that Nuer can think of themselves in relation to God and that God can be represented in different ways to different persons and social groups. Therefore it is necessary, if we wish not only to avoid confusion but also to seize upon the essential content of Nuer religious thought, that we should speak of the 'soul' and not of the 'Spirit' of man and of the 'ghosts' and not of the 'spirits' of the departed.

It follows from the Nuer orientation towards Spirit that they are little interested in the ghosts of the dead, so long as they cause no trouble. When people 'disappear'—Nuer avoid using the word 'die'—only one thing is certain, that they have departed for good. 'They dwell apart, they have become ghosts.' It is taken for granted that people have some sort of existence after death, though Nuer do not presume to know where they have it or what kind of life it is that they lead. Sometimes they say that they may be under the earth and live a life like that they lived when they were on earth amid their cattle and dung fires in villages and camps. This seems to be the general opinion and it is perhaps strengthened by the discovery, when digging wells, of goats' dung and fire-stones deep down in the earth, for I have heard Nuer say that maybe these belong to the ghosts. But Nuer also say of a dead man '*ce mat ka kwoth*', 'he has joined God', and '*ce tiede wa nhial, ca ringde kwony*', 'his soul has gone above, (only) his flesh was buried'. One often hears also the idea expressed that the dead have lost their relationship to the living and have therefore no further claims on them for attentions and services, and that they have instead 'become kin to God' or have 'become God's people'. Sometimes Nuer say that since the dead are near to God they can intercede with him on behalf of their families and relatives. However, no one supposes he can know where is the *wec indit*, the great